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SUBJECT: RAHUL TOURS TAMIL NADU, WATERING THE GRASSROOTS AND  
STIRRING CONTROVERSY

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Rahul Gandhi, the Congress Party's leader of the future, toured Tamil Nadu cities and towns September 8-10, calling on youth, entrepreneurs, farmers, weavers, fishermen, and Dalits to

support his party in the state. He urged these potential supporters to bring Congress to power within five years, a bold vision, given that it has been out of power in the state for 42 years. Gandhi's decision to avoid seeking a meeting with Tamil Nadu's Chief Minister upset many in the DMK, a Tamil-oriented party allied with Congress at the Center, even though Rahul spoke of his admiration for the state's octogenarian leader and the Congress Party's relationship with the DMK. The tour was generally well-received, but it is only the beginning of an uphill struggle to revive the Congress Party's standing in Tamil Nadu, which in 1967 became the second state in India to elect a non-Congress government. END SUMMARY.

Watering the grassroots

[1](#)2. (U) All-India Congress Committee General Secretary Rahul Gandhi toured Tamil Nadu September 8-11 in an attempt to widen his party's base in a state long dominated by regional parties. Travelling mostly by helicopter, Gandhi campaigned in several cities and towns across the length and breadth of the state. He spoke with younger Congress workers in closed-door meetings, reportedly urging them to "connect with the grassroots... start from the rural folks...and (encourage them to) rise from the ranks." He also reportedly tried to instill confidence in young party workers by telling them that Congress could come to power in Tamil Nadu "in five years" if the party pulled together and attracted large sections of young people who are not yet attached to any political party.

[1](#)3. (U) Gandhi repeatedly underscored the need to develop young Congress leaders in every ward and promised to build a party organization that allows youth to contest and win positions of power in the party. He also promised to eliminate the role money and informal influence plays in these leadership contests.  
Reaching out to new constituents

[1](#)4. (U) Gandhi reached out to apolitical youth, students, entrepreneurs, farmers, weavers, and fishermen in several meetings, encouraging them to "join active politics.... join the Congress" and "work . . . to achieve a superpower India." He expounded on this theme at Chennai's prestigious Anna University, calling on youth to bridge the "two Indias," one full of opportunities and the other lacking even basic amenities.

[1](#)5. (U) Gandhi not only preached the importance of speaking directly to youth, he practiced it, as well. Unusually, many of Gandhi's Youth Congress meetings had age limits for participants: 35 for members and 45 for farmers and other laborers. News reporters enjoyed pointing out that at a meeting in Thanjavur, 68-year-old former Union Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar had to stand outside the hall.

The meeting not taken

[1](#)6. (SBU) While Gandhi's meetings and rallies generated headlines, a non-meeting also generated significant amounts of column-inches in the press. Unusually for Congress party leaders from the Center visiting Tamil Nadu, Gandhi reportedly did not ask to pay a courtesy call on the state's octogenarian Chief Minister, M. Karunanidhi,

although he did meet with the Governor. (The Chief Minister's DMK party continues to be a key ally for the Congress Party in New Delhi and Congress is the DMK's key coalition partner in the Tamil Nadu state government.) Although Gandhi played down the non-meeting when asked by reporters, stressing his admiration for Karunanidhi and the strength of the Congress-DMK alliance, several journalists have told us that Gandhi's intentions are clear: Congress intends, over the long-term, to distance itself from its DMK ally and control its own destiny in the state's politics.

Comment:

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17. (SBU) Gandhi's high-profile visit signals that he has his sights set on Tamil Nadu, a state where the reins of power are beginning to move from the DMK's geriatric leadership to a younger generation. Gandhi's visit may well help attract young people to the Congress Party's fold in time for the elections to its youth wing in the state, which are slated for later this year. Suffering from decades of neglect and organizational laxity, however, the Congress Party remains far from becoming a serious challenger to the state's Tamil-centric parties in the near future, and will continue to require strong alliances to remain relevant in state-level politics.

END COMMENT.

SIMKIN